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Videoconferencing and Higher Education teaching in Politics and International Relations classrooms

Dr Wali Aslam

Abstract: Though generally considered beneficial, little is known about how videoconferencing can enhance the quality of Politics and International Relations teaching in traditional classrooms. Studying the author's own practice, this article examines data gathered from a variety of sources including survey questionnaires, Twitter feeds and online course evaluations to highlight the usefulness of this technology for higher-order learning. By integrating videoconferencing technologies into the courses' learning designs, lecturers can utilise them to assist students with formulating questions geared towards higher-order learning, provide varied learning opportunities to fit their students' disparate needs, enhance class interactivity and increase students' intercultural learning by exposing them to non-Western viewpoints.

Keywords: videoconferencing; innovative teaching; intercultural learning; peer-feedback; critical thinking

1. Introduction

Though showcased for the first time at the 1964 New York World's Fair (Noll, 1996, p.27), interest in employing videoconferencing as a useful learning technology in higher-education teaching stretches back to the mid-1990s (e.g. Cochrane, 1996). With the advent of Skype and Adobe Connect, videoconferencing technologies have progressed markedly and are increasingly used in university settings. The purpose is usually to enable students to develop a sense of social presence (Giesbers, et al., 2014), which is 'the ability of participants ... to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as "real people"' (Garrison, et al., 2000, p.89). Though using videoconferencing is generally perceived as beneficial, the literature on the

subject has three weaknesses. First, such literature primarily studies the technology's usefulness in distance education (see, for example, Gillies, 2008). This research thus ignores its support of conventional teaching, where it can complement traditional lectures and seminars. Second, the literature has focused on numerous disciplines, such as Medicine (McLaren, et al., 1992), Languages (Acar, 2007) and Sociology (Glass, 2007); no research exists showing how videoconferencing benefits higher education students in Politics and IR classrooms. The third weakness is that most existing studies focus on 'desktop videoconferences' or 'studio-based approaches', which involve videoconferencing suites. They do not involve regular, room-based interactions, whose sessions use multimedia and projectors. This article addresses these weaknesses in the literature by studying how students in Politics and IR classrooms may benefit from videoconferencing as a learning technology supporting 'regular' lecturing in conventional classrooms. Examining a range of data collected through class surveys and Twitter feeds, the research reveals five findings. First, it argues that, through frequent use over a given time period, videoconferencing can be used to train students to ask questions aimed at higher-order learning. Second, students at different levels of study and of different competence benefit from videoconferencing differently, with first-class students using it to polish their higher-order skills of 'evaluating' and 'creating'. Third, videoconferencing can provide opportunities for innovative, interactive instruction if it is well integrated into the course's learning design and its use is clearly linked to the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs). Fourth, videoconferencing can help enhance interactivity in the classroom, especially if used alongside social media such as Twitter. Finally, videoconferencing is an effective tool to introduce Politics and IR students to non-Western perspectives, enabling them to value the diversity of views on a range of political and security issues.

The article consists of six sections, including this introduction. The following section will review the research focus of the current literature on videoconferencing. It will also outline the gaps that still exist regarding the technology's use in Politics and IR classrooms. The third section will detail the research design and examine the usefulness of various data-collection methods adopted here. The

fourth section will outline and analyse key findings from the research. The article will conclude by discussing the implications of the findings and identifying areas of further research.

Given the dearth of literature available on the use of videoconferencing for higher education teaching in Politics and IR classrooms, this contribution is primarily intended as a primer for the study of a technology increasingly employed in many universities. Instead of presenting its findings as final, it aims to start a discussion on how this technology can be used for more innovative teaching across the discipline.

2. Videoconferencing in higher education – Research focus:

The extant literature on videoconferencing highlights its utility in enabling interactive teaching. Students can interact with remote participants using the technology without bearing the cost of travel (Ritzel, 2010, p. 62). Ritzel (2010, p. 64) believes that the use of videoconferencing can encourage students to visit distant nations and learn more about their cultures and values.

‘Web 2.0’ technologies have particular value for Politics and IR classrooms as they can assist the instructor in developing students’ intercultural, cross-border understanding. Lee and Markey (2014) have argued that alongside introducing them to other cultures and societies, such technologies can also make students aware of their own beliefs and attitudes they hold about their own culture. Ozcelik and Paprika (2010) have further examined how videoconferencing can help in raising emotional awareness in cross-cultural communication. To study cross-cultural interaction in business education, the authors set up a teaching module involving a university in Hungary and another in Northern California that were subsequently linked through videoconferencing. They found that the sessions provoked a range of emotions, including ‘alertness, curiosity, pride, anger, and pleasantness’ (Ozcelik and Paprika, 2010, p. 690). The students were later asked to reflect on these emotions; the authors argue that the reflection process benefitted cross-cultural communication. Though useful, this research is quite general in nature and does not provide much guidance concerning the teaching in Politics and IR; this gap has been addressed in this contribution.

Giesbers et al., (2014, p. 33) have contended that interaction with remote participants using such technologies may foster a sense of community, but that this does not necessarily automatically equate with a better learning experience. Basing their ideas on seven consecutive years of an online distance programme in Economics, they found that using technologies like Skype did not lead to students reporting more favourably on their learning experience (Giesbers et al., 2014, p. 41). Furthermore, their use did not lead to improved student performance in terms of pass rates. This has been corroborated by Cavanaugh (2001), whose research on pre-college students found ‘no positive effect size on attainment, though there were reported increases in motivation’ (Lawson et al., 2010, p. 306). Giesbers et al., (2014, p. 42) argue that the ease of using audio-visual technology and perceived usefulness of meeting peers might have adversely impacted some participants’ faith in their own ‘technological expertise, their ability to engage actively to synchronous cognitive discourse or the purpose of the web-videoconferences in general.’ Though relevant, these studies do not detail how videoconferencing can benefit students with different levels of competence differently – a weakness that has been addressed in this article.

Kuntz (2013) has studied the utility of Web 2.0 technologies, including Skype, in helping students understand the importance of learning by themselves instead of relying on a lecture as the only source of information. He contends that using technology in this way supplements – or at times even replaces – reading material, greatly increasing learning autonomy for student and teacher alike. Pitcher, Davidson and Napier (2000, p. 201 and p. 203) have studied the way videoconferencing can be utilised in higher education to deliver a distant-lecture course and encourage group-to-group interaction involving students at different universities, thus providing opportunities for peer feedback. In their study, the authors found that, whereas most students did not ask questions in regular classroom settings (teaching mathematics in this case), they shared their thoughts ‘openly, honestly and intelligently’ during videoconferencing sessions (Pitcher, Davidson and Napier, 2000, p. 207).

Ritzel (2002, p. 62) contends that learning involving videoconferencing also accommodates diversity of students’ learning styles. Given that students can take charge of the discussion, employment of this type of technology gives students equal opportunity to explore avenues of their own learning. Linked

with social-media interfaces (such as Twitter or Facebook), these technologies can enhance opportunities for active participation of students who might be hesitant to express themselves in traditional classroom settings (Berger, Stein and Mullin, 2009, p. 477). Linking the use of videoconferencing to the theory of Social Constructivism in Learning, Lawson and Comber (2014, p. 74) have argued that peer-to-peer uses of such technologies facilitate ‘a more interactive, co-learning approach to knowledge construction and acquisition’. Constructivist ideas of learning assert that ‘the learner is much more actively involved in a joint enterprise with the teacher of creating ("constructing") new meanings’ (Atherton, 2013a, online). These studies, however, focus on examining ‘desktop videoconferences’ and not how this technology might be utilised in a regular lecture for the benefit of the entire class. That gap has been addressed in the current research.

Mason (1994) has asserted that these technologies are more appropriate for small-group tutorials ‘as the didactic (distance) lecture did not exploit the potential for interaction inherent in the technology’ (in Lawson et al., 2010, p.301). Hoyt et al., (2013, p. 96) have further discussed weaknesses of videoconferencing technologies as they do not always help participants engage in informal conversations before the event that could help break ice and foster a sense of one community. Disagreeing with these authors, Lawson et al. (2010, p. 299) have enumerated several advantages for the lecturer in delivering a ‘lecture-at-a-distance’. They assert that the technology can help lecturers save time to plan more effectively and prepare more-focused material. Though relevant, these studies focus on distance education and not on regular instruction in a traditional classroom, which is the concentration of the current research.

The brief overview of the literature has shown that most studies on the benefits of videoconferencing focus on its use by individual students utilising this technology to link with instructors or fellow students in different locations for the purpose of distance education. The research says little about using videoconferencing in regular classrooms to support conventional learning and teaching. The current article addresses these weaknesses. The following section outlines the way the author has employed videoconferencing in the classroom. It also outlines the design of the current research.

3. Research design

The author used videoconferencing in two undergraduate courses at the University of Bath. The first was entitled 'Contemporary Politics of the Middle East' with 105 students in either their second or final year of study. The second course was entitled 'Contemporary Security Challenges in Asia' and had 69 students, all in their final year. In addition to traditional lectures, the instructor employed both Twitter and Skype technologies to organise interactive videoconference sessions with students, academics, social activists, aid workers and journalists located throughout the Middle East and Asia. Topics discussed in these conversations included Sino-Japanese rivalry, India-Pakistan tensions, Israel-Palestine conflicts and civil liberties in the Middle East. Eight such sessions took place over the course of the semester.

Each interactive session followed a regular lecture, which lasted for about 50 minutes. Lectures were aimed at introducing students to the main points concerning a conflict or a challenge facing states or communities in the Middle East or in a part of Asia. Students were then asked to prepare questions (for remote participants) that may help them with the objective of higher-order learning as identified through Bloom's Taxonomy (Atherton, 2013b). Benjamin Bloom (1956) asserted that the purpose of any learning practice should be to encourage students in learning higher-level skills of 'evaluating' and 'creating' (Atherton, 2013b). However, that objective cannot be met without first covering the lower levels, thus the taxonomy is 'effectively serial in structure' (Atherton, 2013b). Bloom's Taxonomy is the primary framework through which the efficacy of videoconferencing will be assessed in this article. Hence it is useful to provide a brief rationale for the adoption of the Taxonomy with a focus on some of its key advantages.

Bloom's Taxonomy ranks among the most useful frameworks designed to study learning and teaching processes in a hierarchical form. Highlighting its significance, Conklin (2005, p. 154) asserts that the Taxonomy is on 'every teacher educator and curriculum developer's mind' given its utility in helping

‘educators create meaningful learning events’. As a model of learning, the Taxonomy has been translated into 22 languages (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 213). Its particular strength lies in the fact that it differentiates between different ‘cognitive skills levels and calls attention to learning objectives that require higher levels of cognitive skills’ (Adams, 2015, p. 152). For Adams (2015, p. 153) the Taxonomy is useful in two important ways: first, its use encourages instructors to think of learning objectives ‘in *behavioral* terms to consider what the learners can *do* as a result of the instruction.’ That means that a learning objective written with action verbs will ‘indicate the best method of assessing the skills and knowledge taught’ (Adams, 2015, p. 153). Second, thinking of learning goals in terms of this Taxonomy ‘highlights the need for including learning objectives that require higher levels of cognitive skills’ (Adams, 2015, p. 153). According to Adams (2015, p. 153), doing so would lead to ‘deeper learning and transfer of knowledge and skills to a greater variety of tasks and contexts.’

Students used Twitter hashtags for each course (#BathCPME and #BathCSCA) to pose questions to the remote participants, who were able to follow them through the tags. The classrooms at the University of Bath were equipped with microphones and cameras and students were able to participate actively in the discussion both via Twitter and verbally. Every student in the class used either a laptop or a smartphone to ask questions and participate in the discussion. Each classroom had two overhead projectors. One screen displayed the TweetDeck interface, showing all participants the questions sent through the hashtags. The second screen was used for videoconferencing so that the class could interact with participants directly. Lawson et al., (2010) identify two ways of organising videoconferences: ‘desktop videoconferencing’ (engaging individuals or small groups) and a ‘studio-based approach.’ The author’s use of the technology does not fit in either category and can best be described as a ‘room-based interaction’ (Lawson et al., 2010, p. 298).

Smyth (2005) emphasises three relationships at play in videoconferences at a higher-education level: one-to-many, one-to-some and some-to-some (Lawson et al., 2010, p. 298). The author’s sessions added a fourth level of relationship, categorised as ‘some-to-many’. Rogers and Jones (1999) have

discussed three ways in which videoconferencing technologies can be employed as part of delivering innovative instruction: shared discovery, team learning and accessible experts (Lawson, et al., 2010, p. 302). The intent of the author's sessions was to achieve all three of these objectives concurrently.

Twitter data

The author used Bloom's Taxonomy as a method of classifying each question according to both its complexity and the thought process of the person posing it. This was done using typology produced by the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo in Canada (University of Waterloo, n.d.). This typology specifies six developmental categories of question, which are, in increasing order of complexity: 'remembering', 'understanding', 'applying', 'analysing', 'evaluating' and 'creating'. The notion behind the classification categories is that each builds upon the last: you cannot ask questions at the 'understanding' level without first being able to ask those at the 'remembering' level, and so on. Questions asked at a particular level assume that the person asking them will have achieved mastery at all previous levels.

Before each session, the instructor encouraged students to pose questions which help them in their higher-order learning. In particular, they were asked for questions both 'evaluating' the efficacy of different arguments, concepts and theoretical approaches as well as 'creating' new knowledge. At the end of each session, the instructor reviewed with students the types of questions (according to Bloom's taxonomy, above) to help refine their technique and to increase the question sophistication. Each question was recorded for later review and an analysis was conducted at the end of the course to gain an overview of the trends and measure whether the question level improved with the passage of time.

The author then placed a complete list of all questions (n=58), grouped by session, into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and assigned each question a random number between 0 and 1. These numbers were then ranked among themselves, thereby assigning each question an integer value between 1 and 58 (corresponding to the size of its initial random number). Each question, along with its

corresponding integer between 1 and 58, was then placed in a separate spreadsheet. The questions were re-arranged so that their corresponding integer values were in numerical order. This was done to randomise the order of the questions.

The questions were then analysed by an independent observer according to the University of Waterloo typology. The independent observer had prior knowledge neither of the questions nor the content of each lecture. As described above, the order of questions was randomised to reduce bias and eliminate any pattern recognition or influence of any question on the analysis of any other. Each question received an integer value between 1 (for 'remembering') and 6 (for 'creating'), depending on that question's complexity and the level of reflection displayed by the person who posed it. Once each question had been classified and assigned a value, the (now-classified) questions were placed back in their original order, allowing trends to be drawn and proper analysis conducted.

Survey questionnaire

A survey questionnaire was circulated among all 157 students enrolled across both courses. The questions asked them to indicate whether videoconferencing benefited them in their learning, specifically relating to Bloom's six categories: 'remembering', 'understanding', 'applying', 'analysing', 'evaluating' and 'creating.' In each question, they were asked to pick one of five options – the first four ranged from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree' and the fifth one was 'Not applicable.' A total of 62 responses were received, giving a response rate of over 40%. In general, the average response rate for online surveys is around 25%. A 30% rate is considered quite reasonable and a response rate above 40% is considered 'amazing' (Penwarden, 2014). The response rate received by the author is adequate for an indicative assessment of the benefits of videoconferencing technologies in Politics and IR classrooms.

The survey questions were carefully crafted keeping in view the extensive literature on this type of research in social sciences (Converse and Presser, 1986). The first part of the survey asked for demographic information, such as 'year of study' and 'overall mark.' The second part asked for their

views on how the use of videoconferencing benefited them according to the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Specific definitions of the individual levels of learning (i.e. 'remembering', 'analysing', etc.) were included with each question to avoid user-fatigue setting in (Converse and Presser, 1986, p. 58). The third part was left open for qualitative comments.

Focus-group discussion

The author also facilitated one ninety-minute-long focus group composed of four students. The participants were given complete freedom to air their views and not be inhibited by the author's presence. Focus groups can provide in-depth and insightful information that other means of data collection may not reveal (Khan, 1991). In this instance, the author was able 'to probe the underlying assumptions that gave rise to particular views and opinions' (Robinson, 1999, p. 906). The focus-group participants often challenged each other's assumptions and helped refine opinions by offering critical comments to each other (Robinson, 1999, p. 906). The exercise was more beneficial than regular interviews (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987). One key limitation of running only one focus group can be that participants may feel that they carry a major burden of research, thus overwhelming them. To avoid this, the author detailed the article's research design to the students. This exercise helped them see that their contribution would form one source of data, and a number of other sources would sit alongside their views. It was also important to ensure that the participants did not feel inhibited in highlighting negative aspects of using videoconferencing. The author spent a few minutes at the start of the focus-group session to suggest to the participants that all views will be given fair hearing and will contribute equally.

Initially the author had planned two focus-group discussions in order to gather a wide variety of views. However, through regular, informal exchanges with students in both courses, many put forward broadly similar views in response to the author's questions. That led him to work with just one group as its views were quite representative of the broader cohort. Doing so helped avoid unnecessary repetition. Furthermore, the focus-group discussion can be used to complement other findings as much as to come up with new findings. The overall contribution of the focus group to

present new findings was limited. If future studies were to rely more on focus groups, it would be advisable to run multiple groups to overcome the obvious issue of reaching too many detailed conclusions on the basis of a discussion with only four individuals.

Online course evaluations:

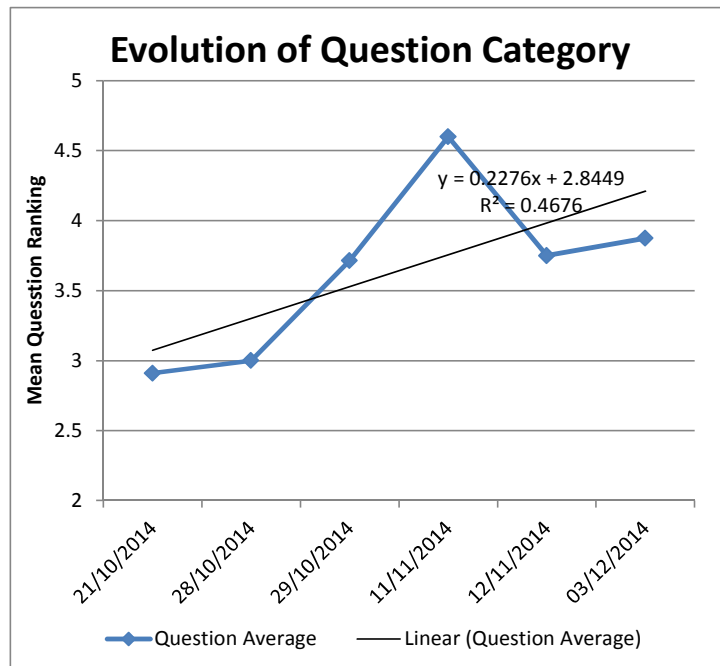
Qualitative comments submitted through online course evaluations were analysed to verify earlier trends identified by the quantitative data. Studying the usefulness of online evaluations compared to paper evaluations, Donovan (2006, p. 285) found that students completing evaluations online wrote more comments, which were more often formative in nature. The author's review of his course evaluation corroborates this, given the length and the depth of the comments obtained on videoconferencing. Students benefited from the anonymous nature of evaluations to give frank views on the effectiveness of such technology in their progression towards higher-order learning.

4. Findings and analysis

Finding 1

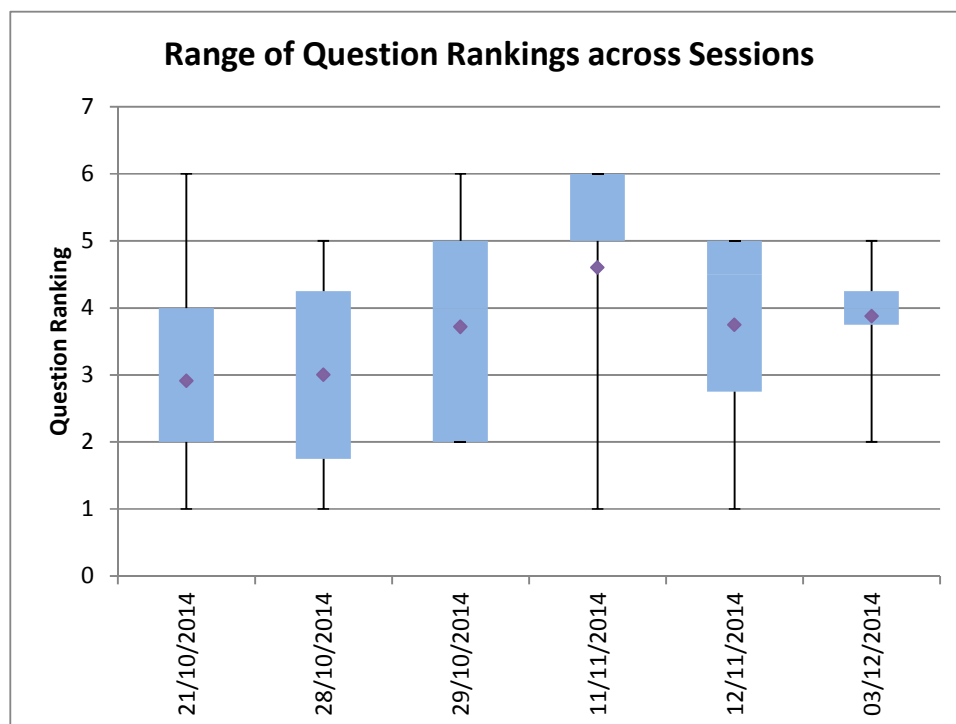
Studying the Twitter data revealed that, if repeated a number of times over a given duration, videoconferencing can be used to train students to ask questions that demonstrate higher-order learning. This is displayed by plotting the mean score for questions asked in each session on a graph, which clearly shows a rise in the mean score over the duration of the course.

Figure 1. Evolution of Question-Ranking Means across Sessions



An R-Squared statistic of 0.357 in the figure above indicates relatively high goodness-of-fit of the least-squares trend line. The line's equation indicates a gradual upward progression over time in the complexity of questions asked. The below graph shows the evolution of questions' complexity asked over time; the height of each box represents the distance between the 25% and 75% values and indicates the tightness with which the rankings of questions cluster around the mean (itself shown by the purple diamond). As in the graph above, the mean question-ranking rises steadily over the course:

Figure 2. Range of Question Rankings across Sessions



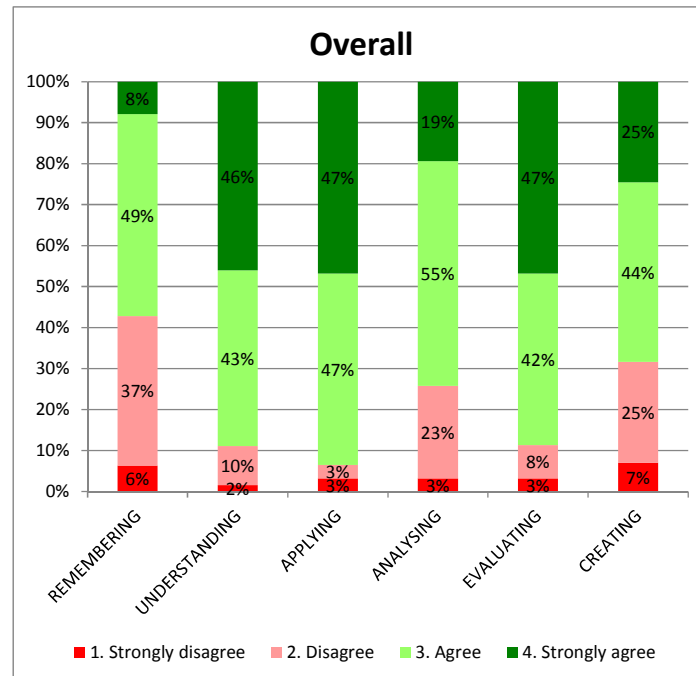
During the focus-group discussion, students' reports supported this finding: when they were first exposed to videoconferencing early in the semester, students were sure neither of what kind of questions to ask nor how to benefit from the practice optimally. However, they were able to train themselves in using the technology by observing not only how their peers benefited from it but also by reflecting on their own practice. That lesson also holds across different years of study: if exposed to the technology and trained in its use from the beginning of their degrees, by the time students are in their final years, they could ask the type of questions that would greatly assist in their higher-order learning.

Finding 2

Analysing the survey questions revealed that students at different levels of competence benefited from videoconferencing differently. Where the top-end students benefited from it to polish their skills of 'evaluating' and 'creating'. mid-ranking students benefited from it for their basic-level learning.

Overall, final-year students benefited more than second-year students.ⁱ The graphs below highlight the picture in detail:

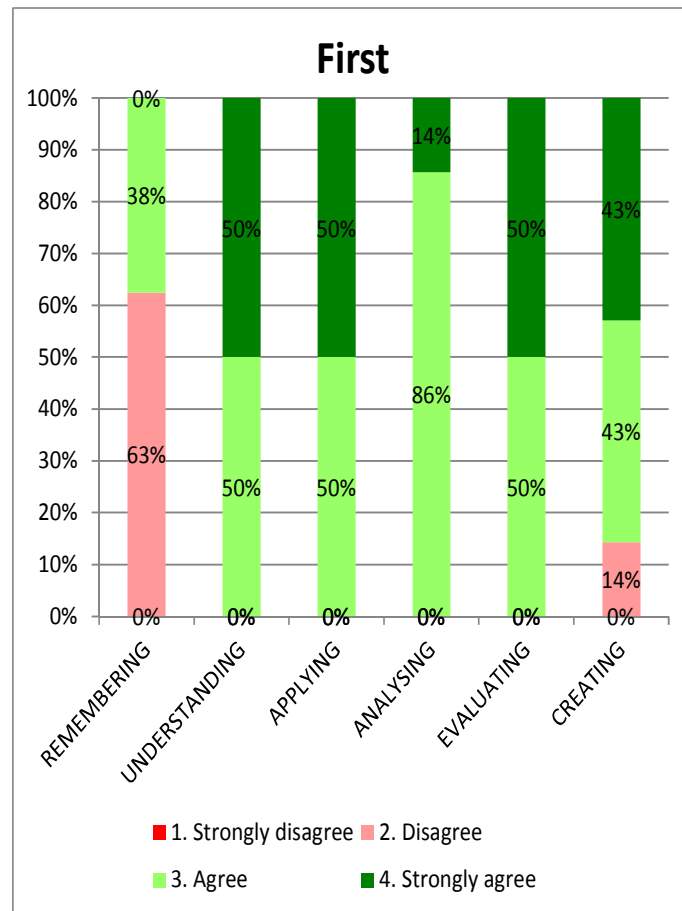
Figure 3. Survey Responses gauging efficacy of Sessions for all Students



Glancing at the overall picture reveals that the technology had the greatest impact in ‘understanding’. ‘applying’ and ‘evaluating’ information. The students did not seem to have benefited most in the lowest-ranking (‘remembering’) or the highest-ranking (‘creating’) classifications.

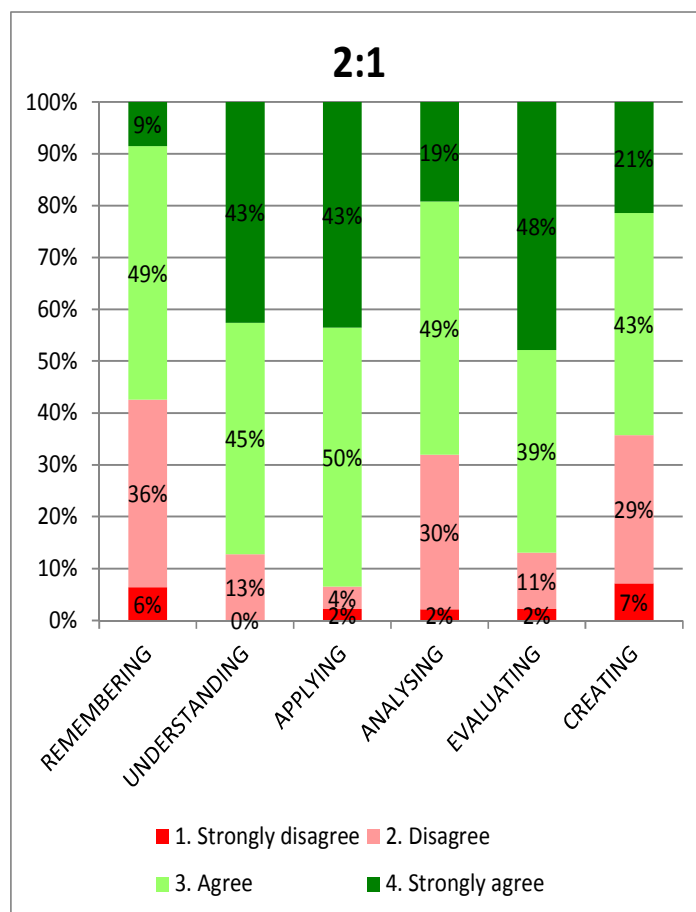
Students with an overall first-class mark at the time of the survey said that the technology had the greatest impact in the higher rankings compared to those students with a score in 2:1 or 2:2 range.

Figure 4. Survey Responses gauging efficacy of Sessions for First-Class Students



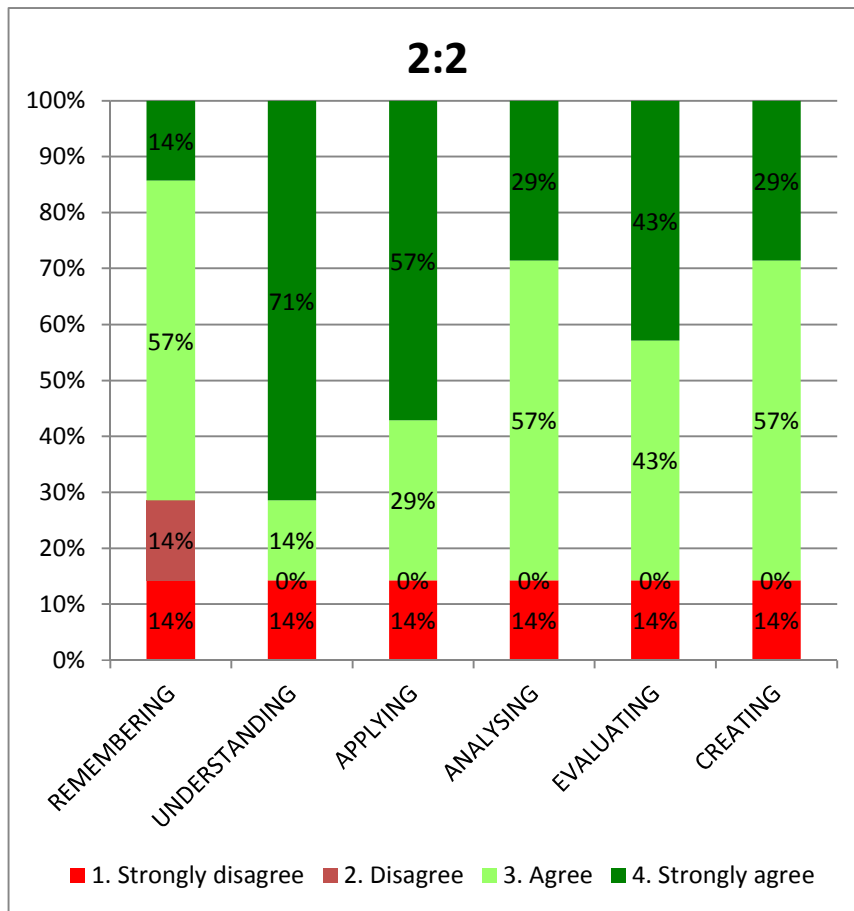
On the other hand, higher-end students benefited from videoconferencing in the domains of ‘remembering’ and ‘analysing.’ The impact at the top end was visibly smaller.

Figure 5. Survey Responses gauging Efficacy of Sessions for 2:1 Students



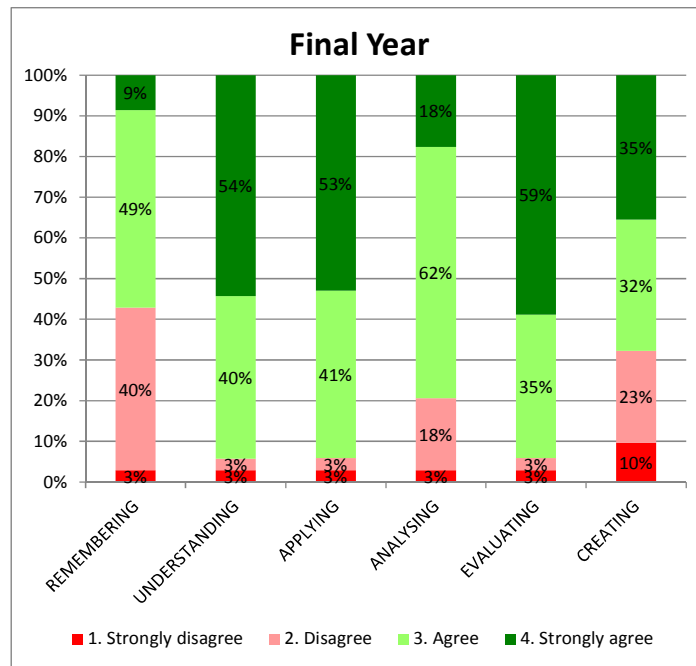
With mid-level students, the highest impact centred on more-basic categories with 71% and 57% strongly agreeing that videoconferencing benefited them in their skills of ‘understanding’ and ‘applying’, respectively, compared to between 43% and 50% students with either first-class or 2:1 degrees strongly agreeing. Mid-ranking students benefited the least from the use of videoconferencing in the classroom.

Figure 6. Survey Responses gauging efficacy of Sessions for 2:2 Students



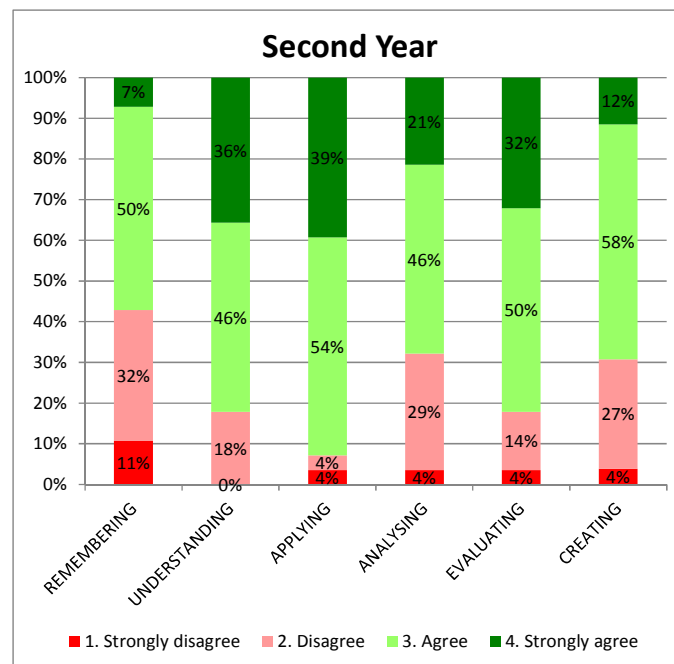
The picture is different when examining the two year groups separately. Final-year students said that they benefited most in the (mid-range) categories of ‘understanding’, ‘applying’ and ‘evaluating.’ The technology had the least impact in the lowest-ranking (‘remembering’) and highest-ranking (‘creating’) categories.

Figure 7. Survey Responses gauging efficacy of Sessions for Final-Year Students



The results from the second-year students indicated that the technology was not as beneficial as it was for final-year students. The figures for ‘Strongly agree’ for all categories (except ‘analysing’) were lower for second-year students than for those in the final year.

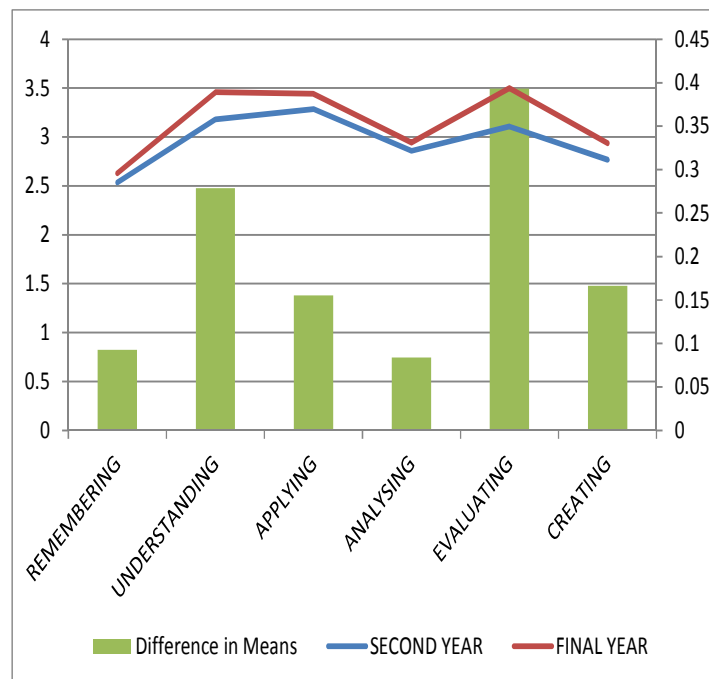
Figure 8. Survey Responses gauging efficacy of Sessions for Second-Year Students



Within each year group, each of the four responses was given a numerical value, with ‘Strongly agree’ assigned a value of 4, and progressing downwards stepwise to 1 for ‘Strongly disagree’. The

means of responses for each category and each year-group are plotted on the left axis of the graph below, and the differences in means on the right axis:

Figure 9. Comparison of Survey-Response Means for Second-Year and Final-Year Students



Across all categories, the impact was slightly higher for students in the final year as compared to those in the second year. In the ‘Evaluating’ category, this difference in means was significant at the 95% confidence level (t-stat 2.04881, two-tailed p-value 0.0449). No other category showed a statistically significant difference in means at the 95% confidence level.

The focus-group discussion also supported the finding that final-year students benefited from videoconferencing the most because they had more prior knowledge of the discipline’s theories and concepts. Students could only evaluate the effectiveness of concepts with a reasonable background of certain approaches in the first place. They were able to evaluate the quality of certain arguments after listening to people on the ground who acted as witnesses of ongoing conflicts. The exercise also enabled them to evaluate the efficacy of certain theories. For example, one focus-group participant said that after attending a videoconferencing session, he found Realism not fully suitable in explaining certain aspects of conflicts in Asia and the Middle East. He emphasised the need of ‘people-centric’ theories for the task.

Videoconferencing also nudged students towards higher-order learning because they felt that mere understanding of issues they were studying was not sufficient. They needed to *engage* with them by developing the ability to analyse arguments and evaluate different viewpoints – something which this exercise presumably provided them. Students felt that in order to properly engage with the topic, they need strong evaluative skills.

The sessions helped reinforce students' confidence about their existing skills as well as helping them develop new ones. Concerning the former, students noted that the exercise reassured them about their learning and helped them form more definitive judgments. This happened when they started sessions knowing how different sides in a conflict would most likely approach contested issues. After seeing the conversation develop how they anticipated it would, students felt their judgments validated. The exercise helped them experience evidence-based learning. Concerning the latter, students felt that the human need to take sides and to sympathise helped in developing new higher-order skills. The passionate arguments they confronted shook them into sympathising with one side of a conflict or the other.

Finding 3:

The third finding from the focus-group discussion and students' online course feedback showed that videoconferencing can be an effective tool for innovative and interactive instruction if it is well integrated into the course's learning design and clearly linked to the course's ILOs. Instead of appearing as a stand-alone activity, videoconferencing should be used as a 'bolt-on to traditional ways of delivering' teaching (Lawson, et al., 2010, p. 303). The lecturer must make explicit linkages with other components of a lecturing session, and the technology will form part of a holistic pedagogical framework (Anastasiades, et al., 2010, p. 322). Putting it succinctly, one student said that it is critical to know '*how* to use it rather than using it for the sake of using it.'

Interacting with remote participants was beneficial when the lecturer provided background and context to certain issues or conflicts during the lecture (before the session). Students were helped in

their preparation concerning applying theories and evaluating the strength of different arguments and approaches. In one case where such exercise did not take place before an interaction, students mentioned that they gained less from the activity than they might otherwise have done. If key facts alongside theoretical ideas are learnt in the lecture, they can be immediately applied to the case study – giving students a chance to test the ideas. That may back up or challenge what the lecturer discussed, enabling students to develop skills of higher-order learning. In brief, the benefits of an exercise involving videoconferencing would have to be determined at the very beginning so that students know what to expect from each session.

If well integrated into the course, videoconferencing also provides an opportunity for more immersive learning than otherwise possible. Immersive learning is the ‘objective of inducing students in a course to remain engaged with course topics and activities day in and day out throughout the term’ (Carroll, 2014, p. 157). The ability to talk to real people in Asia and the Middle East enabled students to continue reflecting on what they learnt during the sessions, long after their conclusion. One student remarked that often what they learnt from the sessions was ‘a lot more memorable than the lecturer saying the same thing’. Students compared videoconferencing with their learning in other courses where they often forgot until exams what was covered in class. That was not the case with classes using videoconferencing sessions, as the experience, as described by one student, was more ‘gripping.’ Another student noted in the course evaluation that the subject was made ‘more alive and real’ to them due to the way videoconferencing was integrated into the lecture. They felt more ‘connected’ to the course. One student noted in the survey:

Skype brought the module alive and I will never forget the conversations we had with people from around the world about issues that affect their everyday lives. The whole point of doing a politics degree is to bring these topics to life to understand the tremendous impact [of] the events, history and theories we merely read or observe in text books to life, so that we may take seriously the real life implications on the ground [sic]. I thought Skype was a hugely beneficial learning tool and would certainly have enjoyed the use of it on other lectures.

Finding 4:

The focus-group discussion and qualitative comments from online course evaluations highlighted videoconferencing's usefulness in introducing more interactivity in the classroom if the technology is used alongside social media such as Twitter. When incorporated into the course's learning design, Skype and Twitter made lectures a very interactive experience. The blended use of the two technologies also provided avenues for peer feedback as students constantly responded to each others' ideas via Twitter (Lee and Markey, 2014).

Posing questions via social media encouraged students to recognise the value of independent learning and self-exploration. They were completely free to ask any questions of the remote participants and present their views on all topics at hand, helping them become both confident and independent learners. This promoted interactivity in the classroom setting as more confident students are also likely to interact more with their peers. Exchanges with remote participants encouraged interactivity by students still more ideas of questions to ask the lecturer and peers in the discussion following each Skype session.

Twitter as a medium was invaluable in helping students who are shy when speaking to share their thoughts with the rest of the group. These students felt that they could use this medium to pose questions and comment on the discussion without interrupting remote participants. Twitter helped with the objective of 'organised interaction' on often-evocative issues such as the role of religion in the politics of the Middle East and the status of women and LGBT rights in the region. The tool gave everyone the chance to communicate in parallel without forcing people to talk over each other and without disrupting the flow of a session.

Twitter also helped remove 'lecturer's bias'. as remote participants were sent questions without the involvement of the lecturer. The lecturer could not prioritise certain questions because remote participants were free to pick the questions to engage with. This strengthened the interactivity process

further because students felt that each question had an equal chance of being answered. They felt that they were driving the learning process and were not just passive receptors. In instances when the lecturer did pick certain questions, students mentioned (in course evaluations) that those questions might have been posed due to the lecturer's bias towards a certain opinion.

Finding 5:

Videoconferences can have particular significance for International Relations classes that aim to introduce students to a variety of perspectives on certain issues. While beneficial for teaching in general, students repeatedly underscored its significance in familiarising them with non-Western perspectives in International Relations courses. They felt they could also learn about these perspectives through books but experiencing them first-hand in the classroom setting made learning and teaching more exciting and gripping. Students noted in course evaluations that the exercise 'opened [their] eyes to the reality of the situation in the Middle East' and a complex message was conveyed 'through small, easy-to-understand parts.' A student said in the survey:

[T]he learning benefit was not always in learning new content or information. Instead, the benefit was in developing the way that I approached the international relations questions in the course. It encouraged me to broaden the perspectives I seek when completing academic work, as well as in non-academic cases, which was very positive [sic].

Interacting with individuals on the ground in Asia and the Middle East gave students the ability to assess Western texts more effectively. They were able to highlight certain biases. The comparison of Western and non-Western perspectives also helped develop their 'evaluating' and 'analysing' skills. In the course evaluations, students asserted that most IR courses in their degrees were taught from Western perspectives, relying on textbooks that did not fully explain the complexity of conflicts relating to issues of culture and identity in non-Western regions. Having access to a 'fresh point of view', they were able to question traditional dogmas, common stereotypes (particularly some views about Islam) and certain assumptions they held about themselves and their culture. For example, one student stressed the value of learning about international politics from an 'Asian' perspective. Another

student said in the course evaluation, ‘contacting and sharing with students/professors helped to challenge pre-conceptions, or biased views. It helped to gain insight into how others can approach a same subject from a differing perspective’ [sic]. One student mentioned in the survey that the discussions after the sessions made them aware of the need for ‘bridging’ gaps between different cultures. One student noted in the focus group that the overall message about ‘broadening perceptions’ that could be conveyed otherwise was received ‘more strongly’ due to Skype.

Some students also noted in the focus-group discussion that these interactions often roused anti-Western or anti-American sentiments in themselves as they became aware first-hand ‘the damage we [the West] have caused and how we are causing damage to this day.’ They felt that reading about these ideas in books would not have created those sentiments as strongly as videoconferencing did. Lecturers using the technology in their classrooms must fully understand the implications of such developments.

Students also felt that interactions with remote participants helped them prepare for ‘real life.’ In the online evaluations, they noted that university education is often ‘about getting caught up in writing essays using others’ arguments.’ Videoconferencing with ‘real-life’ people, on the other hand, can give a first-hand flavour of the type of challenges students will likely face after their formal education. That type of learning might not be directly related to learning towards an examination but is a valuable insight into the lives of people living in distant parts of the world. The ‘realness’ of such interactions appeared often in students’ feedback. For example, one noted in the survey that it was ‘so amazing to see real people with views and perspectives... particularly the Skype visibly showing the Arab/Israeli conflict and differences [sic].’ Another student said in the survey that ‘Skyping real people in the Middle East during the ...course was an extremely worthwhile activity. You can only learn so much from lectures and books, so experiencing the real lived experience of people in Gaza and Jerusalem was really interesting’ [sic]. The sessions also inspired students to continue Twitter interactions after the sessions and at times they contacted the remote participants for collaborative activities far later.

5. Discussion

The previous section outlined different ways in which videoconferencing technologies reinforce the delivery of regular teaching in Politics and IR classrooms. The challenge for instructors is to find suitable ways to integrate these technologies into regular processes of instructions such that pedagogy drives the use of videoconferences instead of using these technologies simply because they are there and convenient to use (Lawson, et al., 2010, p. 307).

Frequent use of such technologies may make them boring for students – some pointed out in course evaluations that with time, sessions started to look too similar and lost some value and appeal. That challenge is contradicted by the idea that frequent and regular exposure to this technology will enable students to better benefit from it over time. The instructor had to find ways to reconcile these two opposing thoughts. Lecturers themselves are unlikely to be experts in using this technology; as such, in some cases a trial-and-error procedure may be the only effective way to deploy it.

One potential drawback of Twitter is that its content is freely available to the public. Social media might help increase interaction by students who are shy, but if they are reluctant to publicise their views, Twitter might not be that beneficial. Furthermore, whatever students post is likely to stay in the public domain for good. Students in the focus group suggested using anonymous Google Forums or websites like Ask.fm could overcome this challenge.

Like a traditional lecture, the instructor had to ensure that using videoconferences in a large classroom did not engage only a select group of students while excluding the majority from the discussion. Given the versatility of students' interests, each might be interested in different aspects of an issue. The instructor learnt that the sessions engaged more students when he outlined four to five points of discussion beforehand covering the interest span of the majority of the class. These points then formed the centre of interactions with remote participants. Adopting this technique ensured that most students benefited from the interaction.

The type of speakers chosen to participate in videoconferences also determined the value of using the technology. When speakers were engaged, passionate, directly related to the conflict under-study and had a range of different views, the experience was generally more instructive. In other instances

where these elements were missing or remote participants lacked good command over English preventing them from conveying their message effectively over a limited period of time, students found the interactions were not as instructive. One student noted in the survey that the ‘focus should be more on the quality of the Skype (in terms of the relevance of the person, and their experiences) not the quantity of people we Skype during the course.’ In some cases students were able to consult the remote participant’s writings beforehand, enabling them to ask more specific and targeted questions. These questions served as useful points to start the discussions, helping participants get the most out of the interactions.

Some students questioned the value of videoconferences in preparing for exams, suggesting in the course evaluations that more lectures could be more helpful in that task. Videoconferencing can demonstrate that lecturers are not the only source of knowledge and activities *not* involving a lecturer in the lead role can still be meaningful. The technology helps students develop skills that may or may not be testable through exams. The teacher can ‘support learners to make sense of the opportunities opened up to them by video-conferencing’ (Lawson, et al. 2010, p. 307). Though used here at the undergraduate level, videoconferencing technologies can also be usefully employed to train postgraduate research students to think critically. This can be done by connecting them with students at other institutions. Such activities will also work as peer-support mechanisms for doctoral students who might be lacking such support at their home universities.

Finally, videoconferencing can also ‘radicalise’ or ‘deradicalise’ students.ⁱⁱ Universities often have a code of conduct regarding what type of speakers can be brought on campus, but many lack such codes regarding videoconferences. Discussing their use in higher education, students in the focus group noted that Skype conversations might have the potential to introduce students to radical views glorifying violence. Chat-rooms are often thought to serve that purpose and the dangers are more acute with Skype given that individuals are visible via video. Furthermore, such views might have more weight if interaction is effectively integrated into the course’s learning design.

Interestingly, along with potential avenues to radicalise students, the use of the technology can also help de-radicalise them. Participants in the focus group said that students might have prejudices that

could be eliminated by speaking to individuals on the ground. One of them noted: ‘if [someone] claims to say all Pakistanis speak like this and you got them to speak to two Pakistanis who did not speak like that, it might calm them down a lot - it is a useful tool both ways [sic]’.

6. Conclusions

This article has contributed to the literature covering the use of videoconferences in enhancing learning in Politics and IR classrooms. It has bridged three key gaps on the subject. First, it has shown how this technology can be employed to support traditional lecturing in a regular classroom. It is a valuable tool in delivering on the course’s ILOs in the same way it is beneficial for distance education. Second, it has underscored the effectiveness of videoconferencing in Politics and IR classrooms the way other researchers have looked at disciplines as wide-ranging as Medicine and Sociology. Finally, it has examined ‘room-based interactions’ in detail, similar to researchers who have focused on ‘desktop videoconferencing’ or ‘studio-based videoconferencing.’

As increasing numbers of universities invest in Skype and Adobe Connect, it is only a matter of time until Politics and IR classrooms will be making more use of them. Videoconferencing can be used for teaching on a variety of political and security issues, pointing to the need for further study of the benefits of this technology to enhance the quality of Politics and IR teaching. By studying how videoconferencing can be beneficial, the current contribution has taken the first step in that direction.

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ⁱ Jack Holland has employed this method of analysis for studying the benefits of video use in Politics and IR classrooms. For details see Holland (2014).

ⁱⁱ The terms are used in a traditional sense the way they are often used in official policy documents. They do not denote author's opinion.